

December
1998

LUTHERAN WOMAN TODAY

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"Waiting room"

BRIEF PRAYERS ON NEWS ITEMS

Sonia C. Solomonson

Don't feel helpless when you hear negative news stories. Pray for those people and concerns. You might clip out pictures or articles about those for whom you wish to pray—or even make a prayer book.

SERVING THE CITY

First Lutheran Church in downtown San Diego feeds up to 400 people every Friday when it holds Bread Day. The congregation began the ministry 25 years ago to attract visitors with homemade bread. Now members prepare a wholesome meal for homeless people on Bread Day. In addition the church provides a weekly health clinic for people who are homeless.

Nurturing God, thank you for the opportunities you give us to care for our sisters and brothers.

FEEDING THE POOR IN MOSCOW

Bill Swanson and Twila Schock, a husband-and-wife missionary team, serve as pastors for the Moscow

Protestant Chaplaincy. The ministry, which receives ELCA support, includes a soup kitchen that feeds more than 1000 meals a day, five days a week. They serve mostly pensioners who lost their savings through currency devaluation and inflation.

Bless, O God, the work of this ecumenical and multinational congregation.

MINISTERING IN AMERICAN SIGN LANGUAGE

Bread of Life Lutheran Church, Minneapolis, is the oldest deaf ministry in the ELCA. The congregation's primary language is American Sign Language. Bread of Life assists hearing congregations that provide ASL interpreters for their services by sponsoring religious signing workshops. The workshops are important because most signing classes don't cover biblical words and theological concepts.

We all have gifts, Loving God. Help us share them. **LWT**

Sonia C. Solomonson is a senior editor for The Lutheran.

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WHAT A JOY ...

I want to share with you some events that followed the LWT article on my pictorial prayerbook ("Prayer matters," May '98). I received calls from readers all over the United States. A few requested my prayers for a concern. Many expressed how they were looking for some way to rejuvenate their spiritual life and the pictorial prayerbook idea was just what they needed. Others wanted workshops done, or materials sent.

I decided to send everyone sample material, and instead of paying me I told them to make a donation to Women of the ELCA's Katie's Fund.

What a joy to be used for God, by God. And I can say many people read LWT regularly and make practical use of it.

*Esther Prabhakar
Rochelle, Ill.*

"BOOKMARKS" GROUPIES

On behalf of our newly formed book group at Christ Lutheran, Lakewood,

Wash., I want to thank you for "Bookmarks." We've used several of the books reviewed to get us going. Also we read *Tuesdays with Morrie*, by Mitch Albom. [Since] April, our book list included *A Skeleton in God's Closet*, *What's so Amazing about Grace*, and *The Summer of the Great Grandmother*. August's selection is *The Color of Water* and

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September's *Dakota*. We're feeling our way and appreciate all the useful information we can find.

*Clarene Johnson
via email*



KUDOS TO 7B BIBLE STUDY

Thank you for including "7b" [bonus Bible study session, "A tale of two conversions," on Acts 8:1-40] in the July/August LWT for use by those circles that meet during the summer. I particularly appreciate it because, although it is not part of the regular sequential study, it keeps us within the framework of Luke/Acts. Thank you for this creative way of meeting the needs of those circles that meet each month and those who take a break during the summer.


*Carl Berkobin
Marietta, Ga.*



"HARRIET" BRINGS SMILES

I find many articles in LWT informative and enjoyable. The article by Pastor Daniel Bohlman, "Harriet vs. the six-piece band" (July/August), brought many smiles.

God bless Pastor Bohlman and every pastor who sees worship substance more important than style. The atmosphere of family and acceptance should be important in every congregation.

*Corrine Hamre
Forest City, Iowa* 

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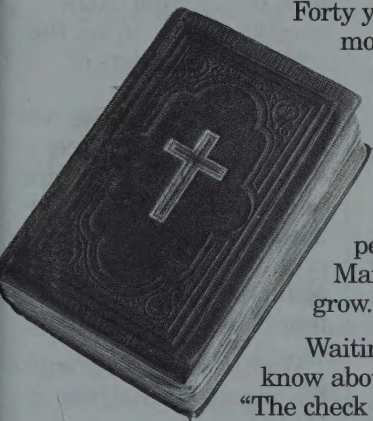
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Wait-ers in the Bible

Susan Gamelin

Waiting isn't easy stuff. We know about that from the Bible.



Forty years ... seven days ... nine months ... Moses cajoling reluctant and grumpy people through the wilderness. Joshua tromping around Jericho trailing priests and warriors and trumpet-blowers and shouters. Mary watching her belly grow.

Waiting is not for wimps. We know about that from our lives. "The check is in the mail." "I'll be home for Christmas." "The office will call with the test results."

Waiting is not easy.

Our daughter Jill was a server in a restaurant last summer while she was waiting for her junior year of college to begin. She was a *wait-er*. It turns out that waiting annoys waiters. Jill told us clearly how to be good customers. "When you tell your server that you're ready to order, be ready to order. Don't make her stand there while you ask what everyone else at your table is ordering and have them check out your choice." And then she punctuated her "Diner's Little Instruction Session" with a shudder of dismay at the rudeness of people who make waiters wait.

But waiting is non-negotiable. It's part of who we are and what we do. The good news is that the Bible is a wait-ers handbook. Cradling the promises of God through Mary's baby son, the Bible tells again and again the stories of people who waited and how their waiting turned out. The waiting was worth it, these stories tell us. The Israelites did wade through the Jordan River into the

Waiting is not for wimps.

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Timothy.*

land of milk and honey. Jericho's walls did fall down. Jesus' wail did bless Bethlehem's night air—and the air we breathe today. God's promises for us wait-ers really are good!

But some of the Bible's stories of waiting startle us. The seconds must have seemed like hours when Abraham raised his knife over Isaac's bony chest and when the 30 pieces of silver were counted into Judas' hands. The hours must have seemed like days when Lot's daughters cowered behind the door of their house, terrified that they would be thrown out into the crowd to be raped.

The days must have seemed like weeks while Bathsheba waited in vain for the sign that she was not pregnant and while David paced, waiting for the news of the death of Uriah. The weeks must have seemed like years as Herod fussed, waiting for the return of the Wise Men. And the most horrible, the longest waiting of all: Time must have stopped when Jesus hung on the tree, the breath squeezed out of him by the devil's empty promises.

What was intended for evil, God intended for good. Each of these awful stories of waiting is a chapter in the story of a

patient God who waits for us with robes, rings, sandals, and fatted calves. Purple skies do turn into gold.

God, indeed, waits for us. God waits patiently to get our attention—we who are Adam and Eve's children hiding from God's questions; we who are the brothers and sisters of Samuel and Mary Magdalene not always recognizing God's presence; we who are kin to the nine ungrateful lepers; we who are as stubborn as Paul demanding again and again that God remove the thorns from our flesh.

Waiting is not easy stuff. We know that from the Bible.

But waiting is non-negotiable. It is a part of being God's children. We are wait-ers. We are wait-ers who keep our oil lamps filled and who tie towels around our waists so that we can wait on others, just as our daughter had done at the restaurant. And we wait with the "wait-ers handbook," the Bible, clutched firmly in our hands, watching the skies for the return of Jesus. **LWT**

QUIZ ON BIBLICAL WAIT-ERS

1. Name six biblical women who waited and waited to be pregnant.
2. Which one waited—only to loan her child back?
3. Who sent messengers to Jesus to ask one of the most poignant questions ever asked about waiting: “Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?”
4. What was Jesus’ answer?
5. Who waited 12 years for Jesus’ healing presence?
6. Who waited 18 years?
7. Who waited 38 years?
8. What father and mother waited for Jesus and wondered if he had failed them?
9. Which sisters waited for Jesus and were convinced that he had failed them?
10. The number “40” figures heavily in the lives of folks in the Bible who wait. Who waited through 40 days of rain?
11. Who led the Israelites through 40 years of wilderness wandering?
12. Which two kings each ruled Israel for 40 years?
13. Who fasted 40 days and 40 nights?
14. How many days did the risen Jesus appear to the apostles before being taken up into heaven?
15. Who knew the secret of waiting “in any and all circumstances,” through times of being well-fed and of going hungry,” “of having plenty and of being in need”?
16. What’s the secret to waiting?

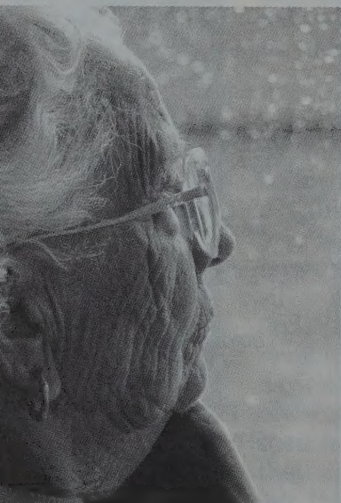
—SG

ANSWERS

1. Sarah (Genesis 16-21); Rebekah (Genesis 25:20-21); Rachel (Genesis 29:31-30:24); Judah’s daughter-in-law, Tamar (Genesis 38); Hannah (1 Samuel: 1-20); and Elizabeth (Luke 1:4-25).
2. Hannah (1 Samuel 1:21-28).
3. John the Baptist (Matthew 11:1-3).
4. “Go and tell John what you hear and see . . .” (Matthew 11:4-6).
5. The woman with the hemorrhage (Mark 5:25-34).
6. The bent-over woman (Luke 13:10-17).
7. The lame man at the Pool of Bethesda (John 5:2-15).
8. Jairus and his wife (Mark 5:22-24 and 35-43).
9. Mary and Martha (John 11).
10. Noah (Genesis 7:17).
11. Moses (Numbers 14:33-34).
12. David (1 Kings 2:11); Solomon (1 Kings 11:42).
13. Jesus (Matthew 4:2).
14. You’ve got it—40! (Acts 1:3).
15. Paul (Philippians 4:12).
16. Read Philippians 4:13.

Mindful waiting

Robert Cotton Fite



After 12 minutes of marching up an inclined treadmill during a routine cardiac stress test last spring, I learned that the monitors were reporting cardiac distress. The attending physicians didn't seem too excited, although they said they would report their findings to my primary-care physician.

My primary-care physician was his usual gentle self when he called later that day, but his attempt at reassurance only spiked my anxiety. We had, he said, several options: an angiogram to determine the extent of the problem; angioplasty; and, if necessary, open-heart surgery. He said he would want me to see a cardiologist before we made any decisions. All I heard were the words "open-heart surgery" and I began to imagine the worst.

The next morning I dutifully called the cardiologist and asked for an appointment. She would be glad to see me, her receptionist said, but her first available appointment was in three weeks. "Three weeks!" There I was, caught in my own ambivalence. I wanted an appointment that very day and sometime after the turn of the century. Panic and denial were both in full bloom.

The three weeks that followed were more of a spiritual exercise than anything I could have intentionally designed for myself. I had to wait. And I had to learn how to wait.

In those three weeks, which felt like three months, I became aware of several things. The first was how my anticipation of the future intruded into my experience of the present. It impinged on whatever I was doing and left me doing it half-heartedly.

The second thing I noticed were my feelings. I knew I was scared, but I figured that three weeks was too long to be scared; I had work to do. So I spent considerable energy suppressing the natural feelings that accompany news like this. Then I noticed that I was breathing more shallowly than usual, a sure sign that my body was not

buying my efforts at remaining "cool."

I think it was the breathing that turned me around. I have never been very good at reading my body, but I am slowly learning to listen to it for the realities my mind is reluctant to acknowledge. So my spiritual discipline consisted of remembering to breathe slowly and deeply, to settle into the silence that is at the heart of prayer, and to listen. Listen uncritically. Listen patiently. Just listen.

What ensued was not a miraculous cure but a gradual letting go of my-obsessive worrying. I experienced more moments in which I felt calm and "held." As I quieted myself, I heard and felt many things, not all of them pleasant. But I also heard and felt the reassurance of people who loved me and of a God who promises to walk through fearsome valleys with me.

It was not an easy three weeks, but I was pleased at how powerful were the disciplines I employed. Ironically, I felt calmer and more centered than usual when I finally arrived at the cardiologist's office. I felt genuinely prepared to deal with whatever she had to say. Happily, she waved off any drastic

interventions and recommended a leaner diet and more frequent aerobic exercise.

My experience of waiting for medical results is a dramatic example of something that occupies more and more of our modern lives. We wait in line. We wait at traffic lights. We wait on the telephone. We wait for friends. We wait for family. We wait for the waiter, and we rarely wait with patience.

Our Christian faith has some interesting and useful things to say about waiting. It commends living fully in the present moment and, at the same time, waiting expectantly for the future. We wait for what is already present, the reign of God. Living both perspectives, in the present and in the future, is a balancing act that requires a lot of practice.

As modern biblical scholarship has helped us understand, Jesus had a unique way of confronting people with the reality that God's reign was breaking in on them at that very moment. There was nothing to wait for; it was *now*. Jesus confronted people with an immediacy and invited them to respond to a love that transforms the person and the moment.

The church's liturgical calendar provides several opportunities to practice a kind of waiting that both anticipates and enjoys the fullness of God's presence. Advent and Lent invite us to practice the presence of God as we prepare to celebrate the cornerstone moments of our faith. But Western Christians tend to be better at expecting God's presence than realizing it; we lean into the future better than we live in the present.

Advent is a perfect time to practice the balancing act between anticipation and appreciation. Our culture is clearly sold on anticipation. Christmas decorations go up earlier and earlier, and the lines in stores grow exponentially as the season progresses. There's too much to do and too little time to do it. It becomes a race to the finish line that often leaves us panting with exhaustion.

As it was for me, the clue to restoring the balance may be in paying attention to our breathing and in consciously slowing and deepening our breath. Combined with a quieting or a focusing of the mind in prayer (with a simple phrase, like "You are my shepherd"), it helps us return to ourselves, to become centered and

appreciative of the present moment. The practice works physiologically to reduce the symptoms of anxiety.

Thich Nhat Hanh, a wonderful Vietnamese Buddhist monk and friend of Christianity, commends what he calls a "mindfulness," a profound awareness and appreciation of the present moment. It sounds to me very much like the classical discipline of practicing the presence of God.

Imagine, if you will, shopping in crowded stores and standing in long lines, all the while breathing slowly and deeply, and practicing a mindfulness that God's peace is present here and now. Imagine coming to the Christmas service relaxed and receptive, no matter how much remains to be done to serve Christmas dinner for an extended family of 22.

No one maintains this centered mindfulness all the time. But regular practice for a few minutes several times a day begins to make it available when we need it most. And with a few seasons of practice, "Come, thou long-expected Jesus" can be sung with the realization that God has indeed set us free. **LWT**

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clinical
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and Episcopal
priest. He is
director of the
Pastoral
Counseling
Center at the
Lutheran
General
Hospital in
Park Ridge, Ill.*

We wait

We wait for the day of Christ ...

- ... for songs to sing;
- ... for candles in the darkness;
- ... for the story to be retold.

We wait to see family again ...

- ... for the days of Christmas;
- ... for the days to come;
- ... for the days eternal.

We wait on the promises of God ...

- ... for the spirit to renew;
- ... for forgiveness to receive;
- ... for love to release.

We wait with others ...

- ... for the music of the season;
- ... for the lights on a tree;
- ... for the snow of winter.

We wait upon a day when Christ returns ...

- ... with the living;
- ... with friends and family;
- ... with those who have gone on before us.

We wait with hope ...

- ... for our Savior who is born in us;
- ... for the love of brothers and sisters;
- ... for the Spirit that will be poured upon us ...
- ... we wait! **LWV**

*Michael E. Thomas, pastor
Living Waters Lutheran
Crystal Lake, Ill.*

Taking advantage of God's waiting room

Stacey A. Johnson



I sat in the mauve- and teal-splashed office, nervously leafing through magazines and counting the cheerful flowers on my pants. The flowers were the only thing "cheerful" at that moment. As the receptionist apologized again for the delay, I thought, *How long can it take to fill a cavity?* For more than 45 minutes, bright teal-clad assistants called out other names and scanned the area for other faces. Anxious thoughts about the planned procedure troubled me. *What was he really going to do to me? Would I ever get back there to find out?*

Somewhere in all the rumbling of my thoughts came the realization that this situation was getting the better of me. After all, this *was* a much needed chance to relax, and if I had to wait, this was a relatively pleasant place to do so. Why not take advantage of it? I leaned back, ready to open another magazine, just as I heard my name called out. So much for my new attitude!

My struggle with waiting shows up elsewhere, too. I rebel against the waiting room of God, never taking full advantage of the relaxation period I've been given. Worrying about what's ahead, I waste the moment away.

"I'm ready to move on!" I shout at God. "What's the hold up? I can't stand the waiting any longer!" How often have I pushed recklessly ahead, before the door opened, finding the Lord wasn't ready for me yet? Oh, I managed to work it out in many of those instances, but it was *my* way. How would things have turned out if I had waited and done them God's way?

Could it be that this in-between time, this waiting-room experience before the next appointment, is as critical as the appointment itself? How I use each day and what my attitude reflects during this time of anticipation could determine how successful my next appointment will be. God's waiting room is a place to reflect, to hope, to learn. If I allow it, God will use this place to prepare me to make the most of my experiences. The great adventure starts here, in God's waiting room. **LWT**

Stacey A. Johnson is a writer and pastor's wife from Arlington, Wash.

Waiting-room reflections

Constance L. Beck



Stealing glances from my reading as I waited for a friend in the oncology outpatient clinic, I observed children in the area. Some, totally bald, boisterously climbed on the play equipment, some snuggled close to adults who read stories to them, and one little fellow sat listlessly in a pint-size, mechanized wheelchair. I wondered what trials awaited them when their names were called and they disappeared behind clinic doors. My heart ached for them and their

parents, who surely suffer as much as the children do in their struggle with cancer.

Background music and festive decorations in the area reminded me that Christmas was just 10 days away. Would this be the last Christmas for some of these children? How do children with cancer and their parents celebrate the birth of the Christ child when death may be waiting at their door? Into the darkness of my thoughts came words of hope from Isaiah: "For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; ... and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace" (Isaiah 9:6).

It is the Child who makes the difference. Jesus was born for children like these. Jesus came for parents like these. This Child came to walk with child and parent through dark days and good, giving comfort and peace when there are no satisfactory answers. **AW**

Constance L. Beck is a retired editor and a member of the Lutheran Church of the Resurrection in Roseville, Minn.

“You are witnesses”

Donna Hacker Smith

Read: Luke 24:44-53, focusing on the memory verses, Luke 24:47-48.

Group: “Repentance and forgiveness of sins ...”

Leader: Our study of Luke’s Gospel comes full circle, and we recall the joy-filled words of Zechariah anticipating the salvation to come in Jesus, the Messiah. We have heard John’s proclamation of repentance, and our Lord’s declaration of the forgiveness of sins.

Group: “... is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations ...”

Leader: Through Luke’s words we have sensed the power of the Good News as it was shared with Jews and Gentiles, men and women, insiders and outcasts, the rich and the poor. In the name of Jesus Christ, the broken are made whole, the downtrodden lifted up, and the hopeless strengthened and renewed. The reign of God is breaking into human history!

Group: “... beginning from Jerusalem.”

Leader: In the book of Acts, we saw the Gospel carried by the disciples from the holy city of Jerusalem throughout the Roman Empire. In our own lives we are commissioned to carry the news of Jesus Christ to those who have not heard it in our own communities, our own nation, and throughout the world.

Group: “You are witnesses of these things.”

Leader: Like Luke and Paul, Mary and Elizabeth, Peter and Stephen, we are witnesses to Christ’s power. While we await our Lord’s return, we want to share with others what he has done. We proclaim Christ through our words and actions.

Group: As we witness and as we serve, help us to actively wait for your return, Lord Jesus.

All: “Repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem.” We are witnesses of these things!

For further reflection What piece of Luke’s writings will you carry with you after this study is ended? Is there a verse, incident, or parable that has special meaning for you? **LWT**

Donna Hacker Smith is a pastor at St. James Lutheran in Forreston, Ill.

LUKE'S VISION: *The People of God*

Carol Schersten LaHurd

BIBLE STUDY, SESSION II

Proclaiming the Good News

STUDY TEXTS

Luke 1:67-79 Zechariah's Song

Luke 24:44-53 The Risen Lord

MEMORY VERSE

Repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. (Luke 24:47-48)

OVERVIEW

Studying Zechariah's song at the beginning of Luke and Jesus' words at the end of Luke's Gospel will help us review both Luke's story of Jesus and the Gospel's major themes.

READING LUKE (OPTIONAL)

Luke 24 ends the Gospel by retelling several of Jesus' appearances to the disciples after his resurrection. **Rereading Luke 1-2** will allow us to recall Luke's narrative of the events surrounding Jesus' birth, remembered especially during the Advent and Christmas seasons in the church. This final session's major study passages come from Luke 1 and Luke 24.



OPENING

Pray the following Advent prayer from *Lutheran Book of Worship*: “Almighty God, you once called John the Baptist to give witness to the coming of your Son and to prepare his way. Grant us, your people, the wisdom to see your purpose today and the openness to hear your will, that we may witness to Christ’s coming and so prepare his way; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever” (p. 13).

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PREPARING FOR THE MESSIAH

Anticipation of Jesus’ birth is central to the Advent season, but this anticipation need not be a time of passive inactivity. When we plant seeds in the vegetable garden, we know we will have to wait a few months for the harvest. Only the natural forces of God’s creation can bring this process to fulfillment. But we can be active participants by carefully pulling weeds, loosening the soil, and providing water if there is too little rain.

Luke’s story of Jesus’ life introduces many characters who learned to actively wait for God’s Messiah. One of them is the father of John the Baptist, Zechariah, who was mentioned briefly in Session 6. Several months before the events related in our study passage, Zechariah learned from God’s messenger, Gabriel, that his wife, Elizabeth, would have a son, who would grow up to be John the Baptist. Zechariah, a priest of the Jerusalem temple, was skeptical, since both he and Elizabeth were elderly. Because Zechariah doubted, Gabriel pronounced that he would be unable to speak until the birth.

At the time of John’s circumcision, eight days after his birth, Zechariah wrote that the infant’s name was John (Luke 1:59-63). His voice returned. Inspired by the Holy Spirit, Zechariah sang a prophetic hymn that recalls images in Mary’s song in Luke 1 and Simeon’s song in Luke 2. Zechariah’s hymn has come to be known as the *Benedictus*, from the Latin translation of the opening word “blessed.”

1. Read Luke 1:67-79. In 1:68-75 what are some of God’s blessings to the people of Israel?

Luke 1:71 and 1:74 might have seemed ironic to some of Luke's readers. God had indeed interceded many times on behalf of his people, freeing Hebrew slaves in Egypt, for example. But several years before the writing of Luke's Gospel, the Romans had crushed a Jewish rebellion in Palestine and had burned Jerusalem and the holy temple. Luke's Christian readers, especially those with family ties to Jerusalem, may have needed a reminder that God's power would some day be victorious.

Luke 1:76-79 emphasizes that Zechariah's son will, like a prophet, come ahead of the Messiah in order to instruct the people in God's saving ways and in the forgiveness of sins.

John did not wait passively for the promised Messiah. He traveled throughout the countryside preaching, urging repentance, and baptizing. Luke 3:1-20 retells John the Baptist's story, which ended in arrest and execution at the hands of the local king, Herod Antipas.

2. Zechariah's song makes many references to Hebrew psalms and prophecies. By filling in the blanks, match these following Old Testament passages (in bold)

Psalm 18:1-3, 17 _____

Malachi 4:2 _____

Malachi 4:5 _____

Isaiah 9:2 _____

with these echoes in Luke 1: Luke 1:71, 74

 Luke 1:76

 Luke 1:78

 Luke 1:79

You may recall from Session 1 that Luke's Gospel refers to Hebrew scriptures, in part to anchor Jesus' story in the history of God's saving actions for the Jewish people and for all humankind. For Luke the coming of Jesus the Messiah is the most important phase of this "salvation history." Luke shows how this phase follows from Israel's past by opening the Gospel with a story of a Jewish priest in the Jerusalem temple, by portraying Jesus' birth into a Jewish family, and

by continually reminding us that this birth fulfills Hebrew prophecies and carries out God's plan.

THE RISEN LORD SENDS OUT WITNESSES

Now we return to the Gospel's closing scene, part of which we read for Session 3.

After ministry in Galilee and a long journey to Jerusalem, Jesus has been arrested and crucified. Luke 24 opens with Easter Sunday and the discovery of Jesus' empty tomb. After making several appearances to his followers, the risen Lord teaches the faithful about carrying on God's work after his physical departure from the earth.

Notice how many major themes are completed here in Luke 24:44-53:

- prophecy fulfillment (24:44)
- Jesus' place in salvation history, especially references to the law, prophets, Jerusalem, and the temple (24:44)
- repentance and forgiveness (24:47)
- salvation for all nations (24:47)
- witnessing (24:45-48) and the Holy Spirit (24:49)

3. Read Luke 24:44-53. The themes just noted will all reappear in Luke's second volume, the Acts of the Apostles. From this bulleted list of themes (above), write the theme you think best corresponds with each of the Acts events, as described below:

- the Pentecost arrival of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2)
- healing a lame man (Acts 3:1-7, 12-15, 17-18)
- Stephen's preaching (Acts 7)
- Cornelius and Peter's dream (Acts 10)
- Paul heals (Acts 19:11-20)

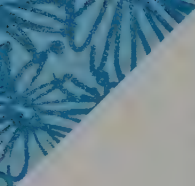
Luke 24:50-53 may seem confusing. In some ways this scene sounds like a description of Jesus' ascension into heaven, which we are told took place 40 days after Easter (Acts 1:3). But earlier parts of Luke 24 imply that this event happened on Easter Sunday. It may be that in this passage Luke is unconcerned about the exact timing of events. Or he may be describing a temporary "disappearance" of Jesus, such as that in Luke 24:31. Even if Jesus continued to appear to the disciples for several weeks after this event, the closing of Luke's Gospel makes clear that Jesus is now being worshiped as the risen Lord (24:52). Their joy and blessing of God (24:53) demonstrate that his faithful followers have indeed understood that Jesus' death and resurrection are part of God's plan.

In several important ways, people who study the Bible together resemble Jesus' followers in this final passage of Luke. First and most importantly, they have also received forgiveness of sins and God's great blessing. They have "opened their minds to understand the scriptures" (24:45) and to learn about the continuation of God's saving acts from the Old Testament to the New Testament. And, like the original disciples, such faithful people can also become witnesses to the good news about God's Messiah and to the joy that this gospel word has brought them.

WAITING AND WITNESSING

A bumper sticker reads, "Jesus is coming; look busy!" We chuckle at it, but the author of Luke and Acts would have trouble with it. Certainly Luke would agree that Jesus will return in the final days to judge the people of the earth and to bring in God's eternal reign. However, Luke would have objections to this slogan because he would object to the guessing-game of predicting the *eschaton*, or end times. In popular books and television broadcasts, some Christian leaders claim to be reading signs in current events of Jesus' second coming and of the end of the world.

4. Read Luke 17:20-21 for a glimpse of how Jesus felt about such predictions. How does Jesus' answer to the Pharisees apply to people who predict the end of the world today?



Recall that this passage is near the end of Luke's long narrative of Jesus' trip toward Jerusalem and his crucifixion. Jesus' answer warns us not to try to second-guess God's timing by reading signs. Second, 17:21 announces that God's kingdom, to some extent, is already present. In Luke 4 and 7 (Session 2), Jesus' preaching good news to the poor and restoring sight to the blind are signs that God's reign is breaking into human history.

In the years immediately after Jesus' death, resurrection, and ascension, many believers also wondered when he would return again. Some writers, such as Paul, seemed to believe Christ's second coming (*Parousia* in Greek) would be very soon, even in their own lifetimes. By the time of Luke's writing, 50 years or so after Jesus' death, many Christians had begun to recognize that the wait could be much longer.

At the beginning of Acts 1, Luke summarizes Jesus' ministry and last 40 days on earth and repeats Jesus' promise that the Holy Spirit would come soon.

5. Read Acts 1:1-11. The disciples have questions about the end times and "the restoration of Israel" (1:6). Jesus again says that this is under God's authority and promises them the power of the Holy Spirit. When have you had to wait for God? How did you reconcile your need for an answer with having to wait?

Jesus' answer recalls what he said in Luke 17:21. Now, however, Jesus goes on to tell his followers about active waiting. The bumper sticker misses the point. The disciples must not just "look busy"; they must prepare themselves for the coming of the Holy Spirit and then take the good news out from Judaism's holy center, Jerusalem, to the rest of the earth.

In the next few verses, Luke describes Jesus' final ascension into heaven (Acts 1:9-11). Perhaps because they had seen Jesus disappear before (in Luke 24), the disciples just stood still, staring at the sky. Two angels reminded them of the

promise that Jesus would eventually return and implied that the disciples should “get busy,” not “look busy.”

The rest of Acts retells the story of the arrival of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost (Session 6) and of the missionary work that began in Jerusalem and moved out to Samaria (for example, with the evangelist Philip in Acts 8), and in the journeys of Paul that extended throughout the Roman Empire. That is not the “ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8) in our view. But Rome was considered the center of the known world at the time of the early church, and by the end of the first century the Christian gospel had been carried to most of the lands bordering the Mediterranean Sea. By telling the story of Paul’s missionary work, the author of Luke and Acts demonstrates how the light of salvation was brought to all peoples and nations, as foretold by Zechariah in Luke 1:77-79, Simeon in Luke 2:30-32, and Jesus in Luke 24:47 and Acts 1:8.

It is true that the end of Luke and the beginning of Acts both urge us to witness to the gospel while we await the full arrival of the kingdom, an arrival that will come in God’s good time, not ours. But the record of Jesus in Luke and of the apostles in Acts is testimony that during this waiting time the faithful are to serve, as well as to preach and baptize. Jesus not only proclaimed God’s will and God’s promises; he healed the sick, released the captives, and redressed injustice. In Acts we have similar accounts of such service by missionaries Peter, John, Stephen, and Paul. Passages in Acts 2, 4, and 6 all stress that the early Christians cared for all those in need.

Like Jesus’ followers in Acts 1, we Christians are called to “get busy” about two tasks: witnessing and serving. No matter how much we might wish to, we can neither hasten nor predict Christ’s second coming and the final reality of God’s kingdom. However, with the witness of Luke’s Gospel and the power of God’s Holy Spirit, we can learn to fill the time with active waiting.

6. Reflect on how Jesus’ followers in Luke and Acts used the time after Jesus’ ascension. What are some concrete ways you can practice active waiting for the time when Christ will come again?

Jesus (in Luke) and the disciples (in Acts) prepared themselves for the work of the kingdom through frequent

prayer. After Jesus' ascension, Acts 1:12-14 tells us that the 11 remaining disciples, some women followers, and Jesus' mother and brothers all returned together to Jerusalem, "constantly devoting themselves to prayer" (1:14). Thus, it is fitting that we end our shared study of Luke with prayer:

Dear Creator God and Risen Lord, we thank you for the witness of your servant Luke. Fill us with your Spirit that we may learn to witness and to serve. Help us, with Zechariah, to give thanks for Jesus Christ, the "dawn from on high" who gives "light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death" and guides "our feet into the way of peace." Amen. LWT

Carol Schersten LaHurd of Hickory, N.C., is a biblical scholar and teacher.

"Luke's Vision: The People of God" is prepared by Women of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and edited by Catherine Malotky. Questions or comments about the Bible study should be sent to Barbara Hofmaier, director for educational resources, Women of the ELCA, 8765 W. Higgins Rd., Chicago, IL 60631-4189.

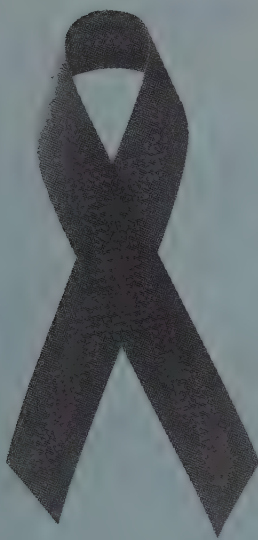
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ARE YOU READY FOR REVELATION?

The January/February 1999 issue of LWT will carry the first two sessions of the new Bible Study, "Secure in the Promise: A Study of Revelation." This sane and approachable six-session study by Gwen Saylor will help you get a handle on Revelation's imagery and help you sort out the misinterpretations of the book likely to abound with the turn of the millennium.

To participate in the study, you will need a subscription to LWT that includes the January/February through June 1999 issues. For subscription information, call 800-426-0115, ext. 639.

Study participants will find the "Secure in the Promise" Resource Book (order number 0-8066-3703-2, \$5.50) especially helpful. Call 800-328-4648 to order, and for information about other Bible study companion pieces.



World AIDS Day

Mary Ingram Zentner

For the past 10 years, World AIDS Day has been observed on December 1 to strengthen support for programs preventing the spread of the HIV infection and to increase understanding of the magnitude of the


HIV/AIDS epidemic around the world. It is an excellent time for special programs on HIV/AIDS education, prayer, projects, special events, and worship services that focus on intercessory and healing prayer.

The theme for World AIDS Day 1998 is "Force for Change: World AIDS Campaign with Young People." To learn more about this special focus, check out the United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS Web site: www.unaids.org/highband/events/wad/1998/index.html.

Women and young people are increasingly being affected by the HIV virus. AIDS is now the third-leading cause of death among U.S. women ages 25 to 44. According to projections, by the year 2000 as many as 80,000 children will be orphaned due to AIDS-related deaths of their parents. Women lag far behind men in testing and treatment for HIV because of economic and cultural reasons. One-half of all new HIV infections in the United States occur in people under the age of 25, and AIDS is the sixth-leading cause of death among 15- to 24-year-olds.*

Consider supporting a youth event in your congregation focusing on HIV/AIDS prevention. *Brokenness to Wholeness: An HIV/AIDS Prevention Curriculum for Older Youth* is a four-session curriculum designed to help young people explore the topic in a Christ-centered setting. Reproducible leader and participant guides are

available from Augsburg Fortress (call 800-328-4648, code 34-7453-2100, \$14.95).

Contact the ELCA HIV/AIDS Clearinghouse and Speakers Bureau for information on prevention, statistics, faith issues, treatment, education, suggestions, activities, World AIDS Day observances, worship, and more. Speakers are available for regional, synodical, and youth events. For information, call Mary Ingram Zentner, coordinator, at (800) 638-3522, ext. 2797 or email hivaid@elca.org. 

PRAYER FOR WORLD AIDS DAY

*Almighty and gracious God,
we pray for the needs of all
those living with HIV/AIDS
and for the family, friends,
and medical personnel who
help care for them. Guide and
strengthen us as we support
people infected with or affected
by AIDS. Help us as the body
of Christ to be a place of refuge
where Christ is made known
and glorified. In the name of
Jesus we pray. Amen.*

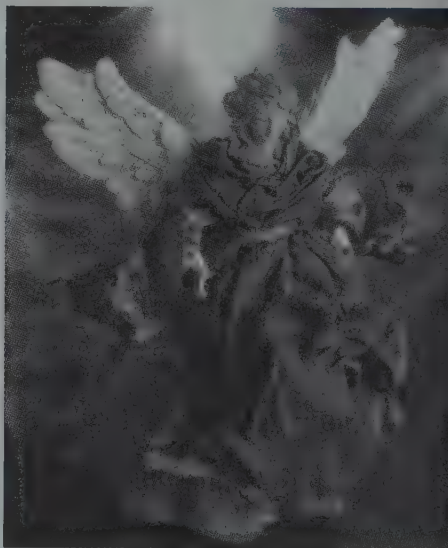
Mary Ingram Zentner is the coordinator of the ELCA's HIV/AIDS Clearinghouse and Speakers Bureau.

**Information and Statistics, American Association for World Health, 1997. Contact them at 202-466-5883 for the 1998 World AIDS Day Resource Booklet "Be a Force for Change." Or contact them via email at: aawhstaff@aol.com.*

MARTIN LUTHER ON CHRISTMAS

The Annunciation

Martin Luther



Quite possibly Mary was doing the housework when the Angel Gabriel came to her. Angels prefer to come to people as they are fulfilling their calling and discharging their office. The angel appeared to the shepherds as they were watching their flocks, to Gideon as he was threshing the grain, to Samson's mother as she sat in the field. Possibly, however, the virgin Mary, who was very religious, was in a corner praying for the redemption of Israel. During prayer, also, the angels are wont to appear.

The angel greeted Mary and said, "Hail, Mary, full of grace." That is the Latin rendering, which unhappily has

been taken over literally into German. Tell me, is this good German? Would any German say you are full of grace? I have translated it as "Thou gracious one," but if I were really to write German, I would say, "God bless you, dear Mary—*liebe Maria*," for any German knows that this word *liebe* comes right from the heart.

"Dear Mary," said the angel, "the Lord is with you. Blessed are you among women." We are unable to tell whether Mary perceived at once that it was an angel who spoke to her. Luke seems to imply that she did not, because he indicates that she was abashed, not so much by his appearance, as by his words. And they were most unusual: "O Mary, you are blessed. You have a gracious God. No woman has ever lived on earth to whom God has shown such grace. You are the crown among them all." These words so overwhelmed the poor child that she did not know where she was. Then the angel comforted her and said: "Fear not, Mary, for you have found favor with God, and, behold, you shall conceive in your womb and bring forth a son and you shall call his name Jesus. He shall be great and shall be called the

Son of the Highest. And the Lord God shall give unto him the throne of his father David and he shall reign over the house of Jacob for ever; and of his kingdom there shall be no end."

To this poor maiden marvelous things were announced: that she should be the mother of the All Highest, whose name should be the Son of God. He would be a King and of his Kingdom there would be no end. It took a mighty reach of faith to believe that this baby would play such a role. Well might Mary have said, "Who am I, little worm, that I should bear a King?" She might have doubted, but she shut her eyes and trusted in God who could bring all things to pass, even though common sense were against it; and because she believed, God did to her as he had said. She was indeed troubled at first and inquired, "How can these things be, seeing that I know not a man?" She was flesh and blood, and for that reason, the angel reassured her, saying, "The Holy Ghost shall come upon you, and the power of the Highest shall overshadow you, and therefore also that holy thing which shall be born of you shall be called the Son of God."

We must both read and meditate upon the Nativity. If the meditation does not reach the heart, we shall sense no sweetness, nor shall we know what solace for human-kind lies in this contemplation. The heart will not laugh nor be merry. As spray does not touch the deep, so mere meditation will not quiet the heart. There is such richness and goodness in this Nativity that if we should see and deeply understand, we should be dissolved in perpetual joy.

Wherefore Saint Bernard declared there are here three miracles: that God and man should be joined in this Child; that a mother should remain a virgin; that Mary should have such faith as to believe that this mystery would be accomplished in her. The last is not the least of the three. The virgin birth is a mere trifle for God; that God should become man is a greater miracle; but most amazing of all is that this maiden should credit the announcement that she, rather than some other virgin, had been chosen to be the mother of God. She did indeed inquire of the angel, "How can these things be?" and he answered, "Mary, you have asked too high a question for me,

but the Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of the Most High will overshadow you and you will not know yourself how it happens." Had she not believed, she could not have conceived.

She held fast to the word of the angel because she had become a new creature. Even so must we be transformed and renewed in heart from day to day. Otherwise Christ is born in vain. This is the word of the prophet: "Unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given" (Isaiah 9:6). This is for us the hardest point, not so much to believe that he is the son of the Virgin and God himself, as to believe that this Son of God is ours. That is where we wilt, but he who does feel it has become another man. Truly it is marvelous in our eyes that God should place a little child in the lap of a virgin and that all our blessedness should lie in him. And this Child belongs to all mankind. God feeds the whole world through a Babe nursing at Mary's breast. This must be our daily exercise: to be transformed into Christ, being nourished by this food. Then will the heart be suffused with all joy and will be strong and confident against every assault.

LWT

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IdeaNet

December 1998 • Vol. 2, Number 4

For Mission Together

Reviving the Craft Bazaar

It's that time of year when craft bazaars are being held at many churches in our communities. These sales provide a wonderful opportunity for women to join for fellowship and to raise money to help further the ministry of not only their own congregation but other Christian organizations. Many churches have a decades-long tradition of hosting such sales. But as more demands are made on people's time and energy, it is often difficult to enlist workers in sufficient numbers.

We faced a similar situation in our congregation a few years ago. The women who had so faithfully contributed to our church sale for many years were aging. The younger women didn't seem to have the time or inclination to become involved or to shoulder a larger share of the workload.

A couple of young working moms decided to form a group of women like themselves to work on items for the craft bazaar. Their idea was to try to meet the needs of the women as well as to make crafts for the sale. The group met twice a month in the evenings. Prospec-

tive participants received a personal invitation rather than a general announcement in the church bulletin. We placed a high priority on communicating personally and frequently. Because no space was available at the church, the sessions were held in people's homes. This necessity turned out to be a blessing in disguise: people began to feel as if they were going to a friend's house for a visit rather than to church for yet another meeting.

We tried hard to make every person feel welcome. We made sure to have a job for everyone, and each individual's contributions were respected. Even the "craft-challenged" could cut out patterns, make price tags, or paint a base coat on a wooden cutout.

As the number of participants grew, so did our feelings of camaraderie and affection for one another. Women who were feeling isolated or overwhelmed by their responsibilities referred to the craft sessions as their "therapy." Over paintbrushes and glue guns we strengthened our bonds as sisters in Christ.

Connie R. Zyer
Grace Lutheran
River Forest, Ill.

Tips Tools: Strengthening Your Net

Sue Foran of Grace Lutheran (River Forest, Ill.) chairs the decoration committee for the November sale held annually by the women's organization. The event, which raises money for a number of ministries, combines a craft bazaar with a luncheon and dinner. Here are her tips for leaders involved in similar projects:

Tip **Brainstorm.** At the first meeting, brainstorm to come up with a theme—perhaps a phrase from a hymn or a Bible verse—that can be translated into decorations. (For example, this year our committee came up with the theme “Let your light so shine”; stars and candles will be our decorative motifs, with purple and silver as the colors.) Ask people to bring their Christmas books and magazines to browse through for decorating ideas. Don't decide too many things in advance; allow everyone a chance to make a contribution.

Tip **Plan your meeting schedule together.** Our committee started its work in July and met every two weeks. Another committee or subcommittee might prefer to work more intensively for a shorter time.

Tip **Spell out the tasks.** Make a chart listing all responsibilities so that no tasks fall through the cracks. (Note: The chart helps people see all the tasks involved and makes it more likely that they will volunteer. That's why it's helpful to include even the smallest details.)

Tip **Match the tasks with people's skills and preferences** so that they can make a contribution in the way they are most comfortable.

We needed people who could sew, people with computer and graphic-arts skills, people willing to buy supplies, people willing to make telephone calls. Some did not want to be saddled with decision making, preferring to be given a job with clear directions. Some wanted tasks that they could do alone at home on their own schedule; others enjoyed the group projects. We had tasks that fit each of these preferences!

Tip **Allow people to define how they will participate.** There's a fine line between encouragement and pressure.

Tip **Make the meetings enjoyable.** Serve simple refreshments and encourage conversation that helps people get to know each other.

Tip **Make a plan to offer child care during your committee meetings.** This is easier said than done, but it's crucial if you want

to involve parents with young children.

Tip

Take notes.

Record the date and accomplishments of each meeting, and keep samples of announcements and flyers. This material will be invaluable for next year's planners.

Tip

Avoid the last-minute frenzy. As the day of the sale approaches, list the tasks remaining. Avoid the temptation to take on all the last-minute jobs yourself (they tend to multiply!). You'll prevent burnout and spread the feeling of ownership.

Tip

Celebrate the group's accomplishment. Send thank-you notes to your committee members to let them know how valuable their contributions were.

At the end of your event, the sense of pride in a job well done will be shared by a much wider group than if the same thing had

been done by one or two people. And you are likely to have a very enthusiastic and willing group of workers for next year's event!

Tip

Highlight ministry.

List prominently at your craft bazaar the ministries that will benefit from the proceeds of the sale.

* * *

Linda Bernard, also of Grace Lutheran, River Forest, endorses the point made in Tip 4: "At first I was intimidated about joining the sewing group to make items for the craft bazaar because I had no sewing experience. I started going for the fellowship but quickly realized I had a role, too. Applying fusible interfacing, stuffing items, and doing hand stitching were jobs that the sewing experts didn't want, but they were perfect for me. I've been going to the group for three years now.

"Encourage people to become involved for the fellowship, and find a way to make them feel like a contributing member quickly—they'll keep coming back."

IdeaNet

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Postcard Ideas

Prayer pillows

The "Piecemakers" of St. Mark Lutheran piece together more than quilts. We have made prayer pillows for each child from second grade and under. The pillows are 10" x 16", with print material on one side and plain percale on the other. On the plain side we stitch a decorated pocket to the bottom half and inscribe "Jesus Loves You" on the top half. The inscription can be personalized with the names of the recipient and the giver.

The pocket is used for bedtime prayer cards or Bible stories. We recycle appropriate greeting card fronts or use appliqués or stickers to make the cards; children can also make their own cards. Children love the pillows.

Some pillows were also purchased in our silent auction to be given as gifts to friends in nursing homes.

*Mildred MacMurphy
Corpus Christi, Tex.*

Double duty for decorations

We make centerpieces, table runners, and wreaths as decorations for the luncheon and dinner held in connection with our fall sale. These items are available for purchase at the end of the event, and the proceeds go to our benevolence ministries.

*Lori Martin
Riverside, Ill.*

Cookies to go

I can't operate a glue gun for my life, but I can cook. I usually

contribute a holiday cookie to my congregation's bazaar. I put them in a nice tin and include the recipe. I never have to take any back home with me.

Elise

Red bows and coffee

Women of the ELCA at Good Shepherd Lutheran encourages the purchase of Lutheran World Relief coffee for Christmas gifts. The LWR Coffee Project offers a way to honor the Christmas spirit of giving by also giving to the farmers and families who grow the coffee. Attach red bows to bags of fairly traded coffee, and this gift will be a hit at bazaars and with friends and family!

For more information on the LWR Coffee Project and for educational and program resources, call 800-LWR-LWR2. To order coffee, call Equal Exchange at 781-830-0303; be sure to mention the LWR Coffee Project.

*Barbara O'Keefe
Alexandria, Va.*

Send all
**Postcard
Ideas**
to

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Email: IdeaNet@elca.org

The advent of relationship



The Moravian Church in America and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, who together share close kinship in their roots and practices, are considering an agreement of full communion with each other (see “Learn more ...” on page 28). This two-part article, in the November and December 1998 issues,

serves two purposes. First and foremost are Scripture readings and prayers for each day in Advent (November 29 through December 24, 1998). Second, between the Scripture and prayers, each day’s reflection offers a nugget of information about the Moravian Church. God’s blessings as you enrich your Advent journey and your understanding of the Moravian Church. —ED

MONDAY, DECEMBER 14, 1998

"I thank my God every time I remember you ... because of your sharing in the gospel." (Philippians 1:3,5)

Caribbean Moravians are in Guyana, Jamaica, the eastern West Indies, and Suriname. While these churches are self-supporting, North American Moravians often assist in hurricane disaster recovery.

Come, heavenly Dove, anoint us to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release, recovery, and freedom to those in need. Amen.

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 15, 1998

"Present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship." (Romans 12:1)

The *Moravian Covenant for Christian Living* sets forth basic tenets of Christian behavior. Originally written in 1727, it has been revised regularly to maintain its relevance. Areas lifted up include Christian living, the living church, the home, citizenship, and our witness in the world.

Life-giving Spirit, you came in power to form and guide the church, a family with varied gifts and graces. Grant that church and home may model for each other the nurturing of individuals and the growth of community. Amen.

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 16, 1998

"I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord." (Philippians 3:8)

In the past decade, *Gemeinschaft*, a Moravian program for spiritual growth, has deepened the lives of many people. This program has revived the custom of writing a *Lebenslauf*, an autobiography detailing a person's spiritual experiences rather than the events and accomplishments of one's life in the world. It is frequently read at a funeral or memorial service.

All thanks to God, who delivered us from the fear of death, the power of sin, and the condemnation of the law. Thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 17, 1998

"All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit." (Acts 2:4)

August 13, 1727, has often been described as the "Moravian Pentecost." During worship, the Moravian congregation in Herrnhut, Germany, felt a powerful presence of the Holy Spirit. With previous differences swept away, there followed a renewal leading to the first denominational mission endeavors.

Lord, we thank you for the diverse and empowering gifts of the Spirit, which are given for your common good. Thank you that no one is useless to you, nor are we sufficient alone. Amen.

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 18, 1998

"You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." (Acts 1:8)

Nearly 45 percent of all Moravians in the world live in

Tanzania, where all churches are growing rapidly. Vital ministries of the church are in evangelism, education, and health.

We praise you, Lord, for the outpouring of your Spirit. You have brought us into covenant with brothers and sisters around the world. Amen.

SATURDAY, DECEMBER 19, 1998

"With gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God." (Colossians 3:16)

In special services, such as communion, lovefeasts, and Lenten services, Moravians unite in singing a series of hymn stanzas selected and arranged to develop a specific spiritual theme, a "sermon in song."

Gracious God, this Advent season stirs a longing to have Christ come alive within us, yet we allow ourselves to become enslaved to cynicism, selfishness, and greed. In a season for freely giving and receiving, we tend to live by debt and obligation. Forgive us, we pray. Amen.

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 20, 1998

"By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." (John 13:35)

The Moravian lovefeast is a simple meal (in North America, usually coffee and a roll) shared by the congregation in the context of worship, especially the singing of hymns. The lovefeast is not limited to communicants and does not take the place of the Holy Communion, but it is the "family meal" of the congregation.

Thank you, Lord Jesus, for your everlasting love and compassion.

May we serve you with gladness, witness to your goodness and mercy, and preach you, Jesus Christ, as Lord. Amen.

MONDAY, DECEMBER 21, 1998

"And he said to them, 'Go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation.'"

(Mark 16:15)

The Inuit people of Labrador received European Moravian missionaries beginning in 1752, and today there are four Moravian congregations there. These "First Nations" people of Eastern Canada seek justice in land rights and healing in their communities.

Dear Jesus, thank you that your words remain vital today. Help us conform our lives to you as the model for holy and righteous living. Amen.

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 22, 1998

"The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want." (Psalm 23:1)

One of the best-known Moravian hymns is "Jesus Makes My Heart Rejoice" by Henriette Louise von Hayn. Here is a stanza.

*"Jesus makes my heart rejoice,
I'm his sheep and know his voice;
he's a Shepherd, kind and
gracious,
and his pastures are delicious;
constant love to me he shows,
yea, my very name he knows."*

(Moravian Book of Worship 662)

Thank you for the imagery of a shepherd leading and caring for his sheep. We rejoice, Lord, that, indeed, you do know our names. Amen.

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 23, 1998

"A star shall come out of Jacob."
(Numbers 24:17)


In the late 1800s, students in a Moravian school in Germany designed a many-pointed star (see below). This star is still used by Moravians around the world during Advent.

*Christ, the Light of the world,
empower us to shine as lights in
this dark world of sin. Amen.*

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 24, 1998

"The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light."
(Isaiah 9:2)

On Christmas Eve, Moravian congregations gather to celebrate Christ's birth. Each worshiper lifts a glowing beeswax candle while this favorite hymn is sung:

"Morning Star, O cheering sight!
Ere thou cam'st, how dark earth's
night!
Jesus mine, in me shine;
fill my heart with light divine.
Amen." (MBW 323) 



*These devotions
were prepared by
the Interprovincial
Board of Commu-
nication, Moravian
Church in America,*

*Roxann L. Miller, director. The first
part of "The advent of relationship"
(November 29 to December 13, 1998,
devotions) appeared in the Novem-
ber 1998 LWT.*

LEARN MORE ABOUT THE MORAVIANS

Since 1992, the ELCA and the Moravians have held official dialogues. In May 1998, the Northern and Southern Provinces of the Moravian Church voted to enter into full communion with the ELCA. The ELCA will consider the proposal at its 1999 Churchwide Assembly.

What difference would full communion between the ELCA and the Moravian Church in America mean for congregations? Resources are available for congregations and small groups to discuss the issues. ***Following Our Shepherd to Full Communion: Report of the Lutheran-Moravian Dialogue*** (code LT6-0000-7480-8) and ***Questions and Answers: A Study Guide for Congregations*** (code LT6-000-9892-8) are available from Augsburg Fortress at 800-328-4648. There is a new resource, ***Living into Full Communion: A Congregational Discussion Guide for Following Our Shepherd to Full Communion***, prepared to help congregations explore their common heritage and consider joint mission projects for the future. Call the ELCA Department for Ecumenical Affairs at 800-638-3522, ext. 2610 for a copy of this guide.

*Darlis J. Swan
ELCA Department for
Ecumenical Affairs*

It's time

Lisa LaFleche Schuster

"Daddy! ... Daddy!" The tiny child dressed in her Christmas best struggled to be heard above the noises of the extended family. She tugged at her father's sleeve once more, "Is it time yet, Daddy? Is it time?"

"Hey, everyone," her father announced with a chuckle, "my little one can't wait to open her presents. What do you say?" In the rush to get to the piles of gifts, no one noticed her look of bewilderment.

It took quite a while for the frantic paper-ripping, the shouts of "Look what I got," the hugs, the kisses, and the "thank yous" to subside. When they did, she made her way across the toy-strewn room to her grandmother.

"Grandma," she whispered, "Is it time?" Her grandmother leaned forward and said, "What's the matter, are you hungry?" And before she could answer, her brother, overhearing, shouted, "Yeah, I'm starving. Let's eat!" Soon the clanking of pots and pans competed with the chattering of busy women and men in the kitchen.

A long time and a lot of food later, the assembled began standing up and clearing the table. It was then they heard the little girl. "No, wait ... *wait!*" The room grew quiet. Her father lifted her into his arms. "Daddy," she said, "It's time."

No one spoke as her father set her down gently. They watched, perplexed, as she reached into a drawer for a small candle, which she stuck firmly into the center of a cupcake. Her mother, understanding now, held the wick in the flame of the table's centerpiece candle until it was lit. With great care the little one took the cupcake and walked slowly into the living room. They followed.

She knelt in front of the nativity scene. Holding the cupcake before her, she began to sing "Happy Birthday" to Jesus.

"Thank you, dear," her grandfather said in a choked voice, "Would you mind singing it again?" Soon her voice was joined by another deeper one, and then a soft one, until one by one, each man, woman, and child knelt and joined in song with the little one who had reminded them that it was time. **LWT**

Lisa LaFleche Schuster and her husband, Gary, live in Sylvania, Ohio, with their three children.





The crystal heart

Alice Pierce

This Christmas when our family gathers for our traditional tree-trimming ceremony, my husband, Howard, will hang 15 crystal hearts on the tree—one to represent each year since his heart transplant.

I added the first crystal heart to the family ornament collection seven days after the transplant. I told our daughters that day, "I want this crystal heart to remind all of us that life is too precious and fragile to waste, because most of us don't get a second chance."

I believe it was a miracle that Howard lived long enough to get that second chance. Four years before the transplant, his cardiologist had told him he had six months to live. Howard was only 36 when doctors discovered he had inherited a type of advanced coronary-artery disease. This discovery led to a double bypass, followed by five years of a rigorous cardiac rehabilitation program.

Despite careful medical monitoring and medication for his elevated cholesterol, Howard had a massive heart attack in 1980. The attack and the series of cardiac arrests that followed led to congestive heart failure and other complications.

When doctors told Howard he had six months to live and should take total and permanent disability, he said, "Over my dead body!" Some of his doctors said his positive attitude was keeping him alive; some said it was his stubbornness. We believe it was God.

To everyone's surprise, six months extended to four years. But in 1984, when a heart valve began leaking, Howard's cardiologist told us death was imminent. This time he offered the option of a heart transplant. Although there were no guarantees of success, we chose to pursue the transplant.


On December 17, 1984, after an early Christmas celebration, we were summoned to the hospital. The replacement of Howard's diseased heart with the healthy heart of a 19-year-old donor took less than two hours. While the surgery itself went well, 77 units of blood were needed one hour later when he began hemorrhaging. But by early morning, when I peeked through the window of his coronary-care room, he was alert enough to give me an OK sign.

Due to the circumstances of the donor's death, the local media publicized his family's decision to bring meaning to their tragic loss by donating their son's organs. News stories revealed that the donor had died of alcohol poisoning after accepting the dare of two female bartenders to drink excessively.

Hospital officials protected us from publicity during those critical first days as Howard's body adjusted to the donor heart and the necessary medications. Our local church family surrounded us with love.

Only seven days after the surgery, the doctors granted Howard's Christmas wish to move out of the coronary-care unit. By the time we arrived at the hospital on Christmas Day, Howard had been transferred to a reverse isolation room. This special room was necessary because the medication that suppressed Howard's immune system made him highly susceptible to infection. He waited impatiently while we donned the required sterile garb. He was smiling broadly when we finally gathered in his room for our Christmas celebration.

Our oldest daughter, Tammy, read the Christmas story from the Bible, then we began to sing "Silent Night." None of us even tried to hide the tears when Howard's weak tenor voice joined ours. After we exchanged gifts, I showed them the crystal heart and explained its significance.

Each Christmas since then, our family has rejoiced as Howard hangs an additional crystal heart on the tree. Each year I remind them that life is like each crystal ornament—precious and fragile. As we celebrate the anniversary of Howard's heart transplant, we are grateful for Christmas miracles and second chances. And we thank God and the donor family for the precious gift of life. 

*Alice Pierce
and her
husband,
Howard,
live in
Holland,
Texas. She
enjoys baby-
sitting their
four grand-
children.*

My Christmas story




Years ago when I was a young mother, a piano tuner came to my home four days before Christmas. Before he began his work, he tried to become acquainted with my 26-month-old son. Trying to be extra nice, the man stooped down to the toddler's level and asked the typical American pre-Christmas question: "Is Santa Claus coming to your house this Christmas?" The little boy met his eyes and without hesitation answered, "No, God is."

As he ran off to play, I reflected on the wisdom of this little one. He had participated in the traditional American preparations for Christmas without losing sight of the true reason for the holiday. He had helped us find a perfect tree at the farm. He'd been to

Christmas teas, parties, and programs. He liked mimicking the Christmas music he heard at church, on the radio and TV, and in stores. He had sat on the lap of a stocky man dressed in red who had given him a candy cane and asked him what he wanted for Christmas. He was waiting anxiously to open the brightly colored presents under the tree. He was a typical American child. Yet he knew that Christmas was the time that God came to earth.

Every December since that day years ago, as I prepare for the hectic Christmas season, I remember the words of my 2-year-old, and I pray that God will give me wisdom so that I do not become so involved in the frantic pace of the season that I lose sight of its real meaning. Truly, as my toddler so vividly reminded me that day, it is God who's coming at Christmas!

*Raychel Haugrud Reiff
Superior, Wis.*



My most memorable Christmas was long ago and far away, without a tree, gifts, or candles, and only our own carols. The year was 1947. The place was Henan in central China. Mao Tze Tung's

Eighth Route Army had just captured our city, and for 10 days the soldiers had been in and out of our home, demanding food, reminding us of their philosophy of "what's yours is mine." As one gestured with a table knife across our little son's throat, he said, "We'd like to do this with you all."

Just before Christmas they left. Knowing they would return in a couple of weeks, it was time for us to leave, too, for I was "great with child." On December 23 we hired a two-wheeled cart with two drivers to drive the horse and mule. Eight of us Americans rode on it. Just before we left, someone reminded me of the ancient promise of Isaiah sung in Handel's *Messiah*, "He shall feed his flock like a Shepherd; he will carry the young lambs in his bosom and gently lead those that are with young." Gently lead, ah yes. The day was sunny and beautiful. The cart had rubber tires. The flat countryside and primitive villages were fascinating. Foot lockers and bed-rolls made comfortable places to sit. We were with friends. We had a welcoming place to go to.

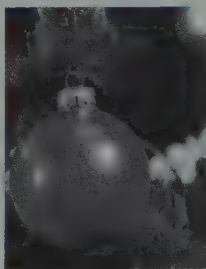
As we rode, we thought of Mary and Joseph and their journey, Mary also being great with child. Was the weather mild? Did they have a two-

wheeled cart? Did they have bed rolls to sit on sometimes? Were they with friends from Nazareth? Did they remember Isaiah's promise?

After spending the night with friends, we got on a coal truck that would take us to a larger city. Again bed-rolls made a comfortable place to sit until so many people crowded on that we could only stand. Soldiers clung to the outside of the truck box. We arrived at a mission home just in time for a Christmas Eve supper of U.S. Army surplus hot dogs; then a Christmas Day Chinese dinner.

After a few days the Lutheran World Federation plane "just happened" to land there because of bad weather farther west. We were flown to Shanghai and there in January a beautiful little girl was born. We had come through dangers and threat of death to life. We knew, without a doubt, our Good Shepherd "gently leads."

*Elaine Benson
Northfield, Minn.*



He was headed our way, with something in his hand; what could the town's meanest man want with us?

Close to Christmas, I was standing in the living room by the Christmas tree, looking down main street in our small North Dakota village. It was a wintry day. Mr. K. was

walking downtown, so I thought, to conduct business or get his mail.

In my teenage mind, I was thinking of the events that had established Mr. K.'s title as the town's meanest man. Was it the time he chased us out of his yard just because we wanted to look at one of the birdhouses he had set up? Was it the time he got mad at me after I was playing ball on the street in front of his house? (The ball went over the fence and he told my Dad we kids should stay the heck out of his yard.)

But this day he did not turn downtown but headed straight for our house. What in the world was he coming to our place for? He certainly was not even an occasional visitor!

Since I was the only one home, when the doorbell rang I had to answer it. I am sure my eyes were full of questions when I opened the door. Mr. K. thrust a cardboard box into my hands, mumbled "Merry Christmas," turned, and walked away.

Inside the unwrapped box was a gift—one of his hand-made items, a sturdy step stool, painted green. It was so well made that we have it to this day!

I don't remember the year, but I will never forget the season. I had to take a hard look at my prejudices. Every time we used that hardy little stool, I remembered Mr. K. in a new light! I learned again what those first-century folks discovered in Bethlehem so long ago: Christmas comes in unexpected

places from others who cause us to pause and to smile. You never know where the next gift is coming from!

*David L. Isaacson
Lisbon, N.D.*



The strains of the familiar carol "Silent Night" drifted across the mountain as young voices lifted in song. If memory serves me, the year was

1968—the summer I was 12. In a year when Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert Kennedy were assassinated, and Haight-Ashbury was a "hippie haven," I was enjoying "Christmas in July" week at Lutheridge in Arden, N.C. We campers spent the week busy with regular camp activities—swimming, crafting, and canoeing—but with "Christmas" coming, there was a special feeling of excitement. We festively decorated our cabins, made gifts (lanyards!), and eagerly anticipated "Christmas Eve Vespers," planned for our last evening at camp.

At last, "Christmas Eve" arrived. As candles flickered in the warm July air, I literally saw Christmas in a new light. A counselor read the traditional Luke account of Jesus' birth, and we sang carols. Removed from the secular expectations of Christmas in December, "Christmas in July" gave me a new, more spiritual perspective. In a world of war,

assassinations, and political unrest, I discerned the blessing of Christmas. I began to understand Christ's peace on a warm summer mountaintop in July.

I discovered that I didn't need to get things to get Christmas. I discovered that Christmas was more than complicated festivities—Christmas was the joy of Christ's birth, and the love and encouragement we give to one another as a community of faith. My faith was suddenly not only something I knew in my head from confirmation studies; it became something I felt in my heart.

Today, 30 years later, I am married to a Lutheran pastor and serve as the volunteer organist for our parish. Our Advent and Christmas seasons are often hectic. When the hustle and bustle signals me to "be still and know that I am God," I remember that night at Lutheridge and my own "dawn of redeeming grace" ("Silent Night, Holy Night!" *LBW* 65).

*Jami Hawkins
Sandy Run
Swansea, S.C.*

P.S. This summer my children, Nora Kate and Rivers, were campers at Lutheridge—and yes, they were there for "Christmas in July" week!

The story starts in the fall of 1935, when the Depression combined with a drought. Dad was in the fourth grade and it was the first part of November. Dad caught a cold and



was very ill. The doctor came and said he had pneumonia and pleurisy. Dad was sick for a couple of weeks and could not shake the illness. By December 15,

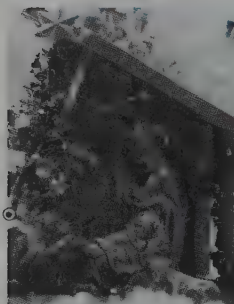
Dad had lost a lot of weight and could not eat. By December 20, Dad was hoping to live to Christmas because he'd get an orange, or a banana, and maybe some ribbon candy. Christmas Eve came and he knew he would see Christmas Day. That night, Grandma prayed for her little boy.

On Christmas Day, Dad woke up to a surprise. There were boxes and presents piled to the ceiling. Dad could not believe it. Later, Grandma told him that every boy and girl in the town of Holmen had given up a gift for him. It took almost all day to unwrap the gifts. Dad had a tractor, cars, planes, and all other sorts of toys on his bed. Everyone told Dad he had to get better to play with all those toys. In a few days, he was able to play with the toys in bed. After 10 days, Grandma said he could get out of bed, but Dad had to learn to walk all over again. He recuperated at home and missed the rest of fourth grade.

Sometime that next summer, Dad began to think about what all the people of Holmen had given him. Dad wanted to give back to the community that gave so much to him, and he found a way. He spent 40 years with the Holmen Fire

Department, 16 as Fire Chief, and 30 years with the Public Works Department. Ralph Anderson dedicated his life to the people of Holmen, who through their outpouring of love, prayers, and concern helped restore his strength and hope.

*Donna Yourell
Muskego, Wis.*



In December 1995, I was in charge of our Sunday school's Christmas Eve program, "Promise of a Savior."

The program

had a special dialogue. Two sheep talked about the angels, the singing, the beautiful lights, the news of a little baby. One of the sheep couldn't understand how their shepherds could run off to see some baby:

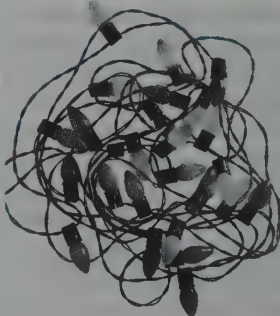
"Shepherds are supposed to take care of sheep!" After reading the program, I knew Sarah and Luke (two confirmation students) would be perfect for the parts. Luke and Sarah memorized their lines, Sarah's mom made their sheep costumes, and they did a wonderful job the night of the program.

During rehearsal, Barbara volunteered her daughter, Jennifer, to do sign language for "Silent Night." Jennifer had learned sign language through Girl Scouts. It was truly memorable, when Jennifer—playing the part of Mary—signed the words

to this special Christmas carol. Several church members commented how touched they were by this part of the program.

Following the closing hymn, all of the children came up front, to recite in unison, "A child is born to us! A son is given to us! And he will be our ruler. He will be called, 'Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Eternal Father, Prince of Peace'" (Isaiah 9:6). Amen!

*Donna Rinehart
Taylor, Texas*



My neighbor came bounding down the hill with the news she had found a job for a client who desperately

needed to work. But she didn't have money to get the woman to the job. If only she could come up with bus money! Before I knew it, my mind pictured the envelope containing money that I had saved for a special long dress to wear to our faculty Christmas party. I talked with God about it that night in my prayers. Clearly the woman needed the bus money more than I needed the dress. The following day I approached my friend and shared the envelope and contents with her. She was utterly stunned. I told her to give it to the woman and only to

tell her someone cared very much about her. "What will you wear to the party?" she quizzed me. "I'll wear one of my short dresses," I replied. "It will work out OK!"

A couple of days later my neighbor came down the hill carrying a long, beautiful red-velvet gown. She had worn it once and asked me to try it on. It fit me perfectly! I suspect I was one of the best-dressed women at that Christmas party.

God understands well what it means to sacrifice. God also understands blessings. Read Genesis 1 and note especially verse 28.

*Anita Christian
Tacoma, Wash.*



At Christmas-time three years ago, my sister was dying of breast cancer, which had gone to her bones and liver, and my dog had just died of cancer. I thought it would be a bleak Christmas. My very ill sister admitted that she couldn't seem to get into the "Spirit of Christmas," and I was feeling similarly. I began thinking about ways to help both of us get into "the Spirit."

First off, in my Christmas letter to friends and family, I asked them to send my sister a card or a present in an attempt to brighten her Christmas. She was so proud of her cards and gifts. She put the cards and letters in a large basket by her

bedside and read them through the last months of her life.

I remembered that giving to someone who cannot give back is another way to get into the "Spirit of Christmas." As part of my congregation's program for needy families, I bought a gift for a toddler. A child in our neighborhood who seemed lonely and had a learning disability came to mind, and I shopped for him.

I placed a poinsettia at my veterinarian's office so that people with sick animals could enjoy it through the season. This helped me overcome the grief of the recent loss of my beloved dog.

I made a Christmas basket for an elderly lady that I often visited in a nursing home. That was a special visit. I also worked on a project to get a sofa for an elderly friend.

I allowed my mind to go back in my childhood and recall the special Christmases I had while growing up. Being one of seven children, we only got one present or sometimes just a bag of candy. We always had a special meal, and Christmas was the most wonderful day of the year. I remembered the special Christmas when my mom gave me the white Bible I wanted.

On that Christmas three years ago, I composed this special prayer, which we've used every year since:

Father, thank you for St. Nicholas and other unassuming saints in our midst who demonstrate to us the true meaning of Christ's birthday. Today fill our hearts with the "Spirit

of Christmas." Bless our home with your grace, surround us with your love, lighten our burdens, and constantly abide in our hearts. Bring happiness to each one of us for this Christmas season and always.

As we eat the food that we prepared, we ask you to bless it. Help us to recognize the hungry and hurting people in our world, and help us to respond according to our capabilities with the "Spirit of Christmas" that is in each of us. Amen.

*Viola I. Baker
Tallahassee, Fla.*



Dear Pastor Dave and Pastor Mitzi,

I've meant to write this since Christmas Eve. The service that evening was won-

derful. The carols, the organ, the candlelit "Silent Night," Pastor Mitzi's message, and the annual retelling of the Christmas story by heart—and from the heart—of Pastor Dave ... all of these things again stirred up the magic and awesomeness that I look for every year.

Last year at Christmas, our 10-year-old daughter (our "baby") put her arm around me and lovingly and most straightforwardly said, "Mom, I know about Santa Claus. You don't have to try so hard."

With those words in mind, this year was the first in about a dozen

years of parenting that the "magic" and "mystery" was missing. Few secrets. Few surprises. With a sigh of relief, some things were easier ... like how to hide that giant gift until it could go under the tree. No more staying up till 2 or 3 a.m. assembling some plastic snap-together-adhesive-stickered toy. Indeed, I didn't have to try so hard, but I missed the sense of wonder that brought me back to my own childhood when my parents, in their own way, had staged many wondrous Christmases for me.

And so I've come to realize that there is one place where I will always have that mystery and wonder. There is still one place where I can feel the joy of anticipating. As long as there is music, and candle glow, and Jesus' birthday story told from the heart, I'll have that feeling at church.

Thank you for making it happen this year at Our Savior's!

*Ilene Hegg Pavelko
West Salem, Wis. LWT*

DO YOU HAVE AN IDEA FOR LWT READER CALL?

What would you like to see as an LWT Reader Call? Send in your topic idea(s) to LWT Reader Call Suggestion, 8765 W. Higgins Road, Chicago, IL 60631-4189

You keep us waiting

You, the God of all time,
want us to wait for the right time in which to discover
who we are, where we must go,
who will be with us, and what we must do.
So thank you ... for the waiting time.

You keep us looking.
You, the God of all space,
want us to look in the right and wrong places
for signs of hope,
for people who are hopeless,
for visions of a better world that will appear
among the disappointments of the world we know.
So thank you ... for the looking time.

You keep us loving.
You, the God whose name is love,
want us to be like you—
to love the loveless and the unlovely and the unlovable;
to love without jealousy or design or threat;
and most difficult of all, to love ourselves.
So thank you ... for the loving time.

And in all this, you keep us,
through hard questions with no easy answers;
through failing where we hoped to succeed
and making an impact when we felt we were useless;
through the patience and the dreams and the love of others;
and through Jesus Christ and his Spirit,
you keep us.
So thank you ... for the keeping time,
and for now, and for ever. Amen.

Iona Community, Scotland

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Christmas presence

Marj Leegard



Are you the poking, wiggling, hefting kind? The person who meddles under the Christmas tree? I investigate until I am satisfied that I know what is in the package. My knowing is not always accurate. I was sure that one box was a bathroom scale. It had the feel, the shape, the weight. I was not very excited about opening presents that year. When I opened the box I laughed and cried and thanked. It was a new typewriter—little, blue, and portable—and it did not skip spaces or destroy ribbons.

On my 50th birthday there was a box in my husband's closet. A flat circle at the top, and long and narrow at the bottom. Just right for a barbecue grill. The 50th birthday is a milestone that can hang on you like a millstone. And I did not want to barbecue. I thawed steaks and bought charcoal so that I could be properly appreciative. My grill turned out to be a guitar! Being 50 was not the end of life: it was the start of discovering that I was not meant to be a guitar player. But it was lots of fun trying. Gifts are wonderful. Their contents are hidden, and the surprises are surrounded by love.

When God came into this world in the form of a baby, wrapped in the kind of baby clothes that were common and laid to sleep in a manger filled with sweet hay, the present was still hidden. The surprise was not revealed.

Oh, the angels sang and the shepherds came and Wise Men were out in the desert, looking at a blazing star and plodding along. The people looked and thought: *A Savior? We need an army to chase the invaders from our land. We need a king to lead the army. This small present in a Bethlehem stable is not exactly what we expected.*

And then that gift became leader and teacher. He chose disciples and taught. People who were blind heard him and came. People who were deaf saw him and came. Those who could not walk were carried. And the grief-stricken had children restored to life. This *gift* became healer, and the people thought they knew what the present was. The multitudes ate from meager loaves and fishes, and there was enough. Now they were sure what the gift was. Then the storm was stilled—and there was another dimension of the present to examine.

God's presence in the form of a Savior dying and then rising to prepare a place for us emerges from all the promising possibilities of the most wonderful of gifts.

The world says that Christmas is presents. We know Christmas is *presence*. Christmas is God's presence here with us and our presence with God in eternity. **LWT**

LWT columnist Marj Leegard and her husband, Jerome, are members of Bakke-Lund-Richwood parish in Detroit Lakes, Minn.

Christmas Eve

It isn't the tree
Nor the lights
Nor the feast.

It isn't the tale
Of the Star
In the East.

It isn't the gifts
With wrappings
So bright.

It's the love God brought
That delights us
This night.

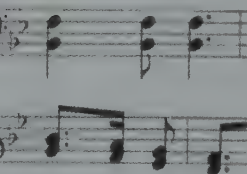
*Mary Mullen
Reading, Mass.*

Christ the Savior is born

Sharon Smith Huff



1 Si - lent night,
2 Si - lent night,
3 Si - lent night,



vir - gin moth
stream from heav
beams from your



All through my life, God has used this hymn to reach me.

There was the Christmas of the birth. Swaddling my firstborn son connected me to Mary in a tangible way. For the first time the reading became so real to me it could be touched: "And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger" (Luke 2:7). My son in his newborn helplessness

"What are your childhood memories of Christmas?" was the question posed in a Bible study.

My most vivid memory was singing "Silent Night" at the Christmas Eve candlelight service. I recall staring into the candle in my hand and singing the words "Christ the Savior is born."

snuggled close to me. He did not yet know it, but his salvation depended on the birth of another: "Christ the Savior is born."

There was the year of uncertainty. We needed employment, yet nothing was forthcoming. That Christmas Eve the words of the song assured me that God is in control. God, who orchestrated Jesus' birth, would surely orchestrate our lives. The words "Christ the Savior is born" comforted me.

There was the year of the cancer. It seems incredible now that we could disregard those obvious symptoms—my husband's continual chill and nosebleeds. When the doctor speculated about diagnoses, phrases swirled, "CBC (complete blood count) needed," and "fatal." We lived in a nightmare of anxiety. He was diagnosed with a rare, but treatable, form of leukemia. That year as I stared into the candle flame I saw that even in his birth Christ was shadowed with the cross. "Christ the Savior is born" also implies that Christ the Savior will die. His life was not free from suffering; neither is mine.

God has richly expanded my childhood memory of "Silent Night." Today when I sing the words, I am awed by the incredible message that stands above all of life's ambiguities, joys, and catastrophes: "Christ the Savior is born." **AWT**

Sharon Smith Huff is an ELCA pastor serving at Faith Lutheran in Three Lakes, Wis. She and her husband, Tom, also an ELCA pastor, have three sons and a daughter.

La ultima visitante: The last visitor

*A Spanish story translated by
Gerhard M. Cartford*

Bethlehem at daybreak. The star has just passed from sight, the last pilgrim has left the stable. The virgin Mary smooths out the straw; the Baby is about to go to sleep.

Sleep? On Christmas morning?

Softly the stable door opens, moved, as it were, more by a breath of air than by a hand. An old woman dressed in tattered rags appears in the shadows. Indeed so old and wrinkled is she that, in the earthen color of her face, her mouth resembles nothing so much as another wrinkle.

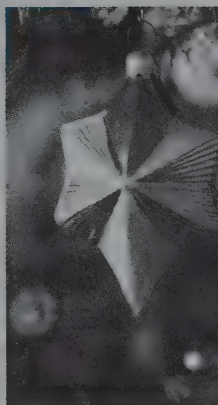
On seeing her, Mary takes fright, as though seeing an apparition. The infant Jesus, fortunately, is sleeping. The ass and the cow show no signs of fear, and they watch placidly as the woman makes her slow way forward. It is as if they have always known her. Mary, however, doesn't take her eyes off the old woman, whose every step seems to be measured in centuries, so slow is her progress. Finally she reaches the side of the cradle. The Infant sleeps on.

How is it possible to sleep on Christmas morning?

Suddenly the Baby opens his eyes. His mother is filled with wonder to see that his eyes and those of the old woman are exactly alike, shining brightly with the same hope.

The old one bends over the straw, meanwhile, searching in her worn clothes for something that takes her ages to find. Mary watches anxiously. The animals also watch, but without anxiety; it is as if they know what is about to happen. At long last, the old woman finds what she is seeking and, hiding it in her hand, she gives it to the Child.

After the treasures from the Magi and the offerings of the shepherds, whatever could the old woman's gift be? Mary is not able to make it out. All she can see is the



ancient shoulder, bent by 1000 years, bent even more now as the old one stoops low over the cradle. But the ass and the cow can see, and they are not at all surprised.

It is ever so long before the woman steps back from the Child, looking as though she has been relieved of a burden that has for ages bowed her down almost to the ground. No longer bent over, she stands erect, her head very nearly brushing the canopy above the cradle. Her face has recovered its youth and beauty. Her eyes now glow with joy.

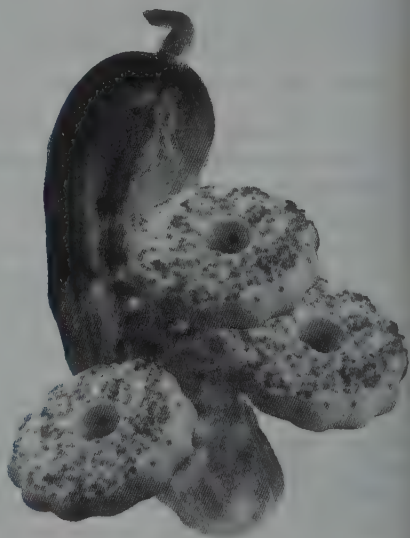
When the woman turns to go out into the night from whence she came, Mary is at last able to see the mysterious present.

Eve—for it was she—had given the Child an apple, the very apple of the first sin (and countless since). The bright red apple shone in the tiny hands of the Holy Child like the sphere of the new world which, with him, had just been born. **LWT**

Gerhard M. Cartford of St. Paul, Minn., writes: "In 1979, my wife, Polly, and I were living in Bogota, Colombia, working with the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Colombia in the field of worship and music. It was then that I came across this Christmas story in a diocesan paper of the Roman Catholic Church. I was drawn to it immediately by the poignancy of its theme and intrigued by how it linked the creation and redemption stories."

The Tolley Christmas pageant

Sonja Odland Hernes



The Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tolley is a small congregation in North Dakota. In 1995 it was so small that there were just enough children in the congregation to do a mini-version of the Christmas pageant. There was one child to be Mary, one to be Joseph, one angel, one shepherd, and one Wise Man.

On the day of the program, a problem arose. Joseph became ill while waiting in the church basement. Everyone agreed that it would be better for him to lose his lunch in the basement instead of in the manger. The shepherd's mother and Sunday school teacher tried to

persuade the shepherd to go on as Joseph, thinking Joseph was a more important character than the shepherd. The shepherd refused!

Another problem developed. The angel, who was only 3 years old, was not cooperating. She did not want to be a part of the pageant unless her mother also would take part. So the angel's mother dressed up in the largest angel costume available. There were now two angels ... but no Joseph.

The littler angel, still uncooperative, had to be bribed with a cookie, which she held fast in her right hand. However, what she really wanted was a pickle that she spied in the pickle dish that was set out for the potluck supper to follow the pageant. So with cookie in one hand and pickle in the other, she proceeded up the aisle with her mother.

When the little angel came to the stable, she found Mary alone at the manger. Wanting to have a close-up look at the baby Jesus, the angel sat in Joseph's chair—with pickle and cookie still in hand. Mary gave the angel a dirty look—a look that said, "You don't belong in this chair!" Unperturbed, the angel took a bite of pickle and gazed tenderly at the doll in the manger. Mary soon got over her attitude and became again an adoring mother. The lone shepherd came to see the baby Jesus, and the lone Wise Man came up the aisle to present his gift—whether it was gold, frankincense, or myrrh (or all three), I don't remember.

Too soon the pageant was over. The simple, down-to-earth presentation touched in different ways those of us who were sitting in the pews. Some were amused, some were proud, some like myself were moved. This humble pageant truly represented the very humble beginning of God's life on earth. The pageant, without pomp, represented for me the way that God often comes into our hearts—simply. And God finds some of us with an attitude, some of us clutching our "pickles," some of us unwilling to change roles (like the shepherd), and some like the little angel, afraid. No matter! God comes! **LWT**

Sonja Odland Hernes is a former elementary school teacher, a mother of four, and a grandmother of seven. Her husband, Joel, is pastor of Tolley Evangelical Lutheran and Carpio Lutheran in North Dakota.

The Christmas cross

Jeff Martinson



The Advent season had just begun, and we were going to town to get a tree. Joy!

It had to be the perfect tree, surely. Shapely and straight, with no bare spots. We praised the tree. We praised its size and shape, its fragrance and touch. It was soft to the touch, then. Soft like the newborn baby it would honor.

We loaded it up with lights, ornaments, and tinsel. We sat and admired it. It was a wonderful tree. It sparkled in the darkness, guarded the treasures underneath it, and held in its arms the most exquisite handmade angels, the precious baby in the nutshell, and a fragile seashell manger made by Grandma.

The tree served us well for the holidays.

Following the grand day, however, the tree faded. Its branches drooped, and its needles rained down. Then ornaments, too, were found cracked at its base. The children cried when needles went through their socks. The tree had become dry and sharp and prickly. I suddenly hated it.

So I took off the decorations, but it wouldn't give them up without a fight. My hands were wounded and stung. I dragged the tree out to the street. I swept up a shopping bag full of needles with joy escaping my heart like air from a punctured balloon. This once-beautiful tree was bare and ugly. The garbage collector would not pick it up. It stayed there for weeks.

And then it was Lent. Lent needs a cross. The cruder the better. Guess what came back into the house? It eventually ended up at the church.

Come and see the Christmas cross, not that I'm overjoyed by it. It tells more singularly and powerfully of God's gift and salvation now than it ever could have before.

The Christmas cross was once beautiful and adored like the baby it celebrated. Then, like the baby, the tree was cast out, rejected, cursed, broken, and left for burial.

It is God's greatest work, the Christmas cross. It stands in the church, and it turns my gaze away. Not that I'm really proud of it, or, for that matter, completely ashamed of it. I know what it was and I know what it is, and I most surely believe what it will be. Thanks be to God for the victory! Joy! **LWT**

Jeff Martinson serves as pastor of the Frederick Lutheran Parish in Frederick, S.D. He and his wife, Faith, have two children, Leif and Hope.

Greetings to you from LWT

***Blessed Advent,
Merry Christmas,
Joyful Epiphany!***

Dear reader,

Joy to you! In these special seasons—and always! We thank God for you.

The staff of Lutheran Woman Today wants to take this opportunity to say *thank you* to LWT readers for their continued support. We've seen that LWT readers are willing to wrestle with challenging subjects and are committed to growing in faith and mission. We appreciate every one of you. We remember you in our prayers, especially as we plan each issue of the magazine. We hope you feel God's presence and blessing in all areas of your lives.

We want to wish you and your families an especially blessed and hope-filled Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany!

Your friends at LWT

What's your favorite Advent, Christmas, or Epiphany hymn? See how the LWT staff answered that question on the next page.



I love the children's (and adults') carol "The Friendly Beasts" because it reminds me that God sent Jesus to save the whole created world. And

the animals were the first to share their space with Jesus, and be hospitable to the little "stranger" in their midst.

Nancy J. Stelling



Even though I'm not sure what "cloven skies" are, a favorite hymn is "It Came Upon a Midnight Clear," especially for the third verse: "Oh

rest beside the weary road, And hear the Angels sing."

Sue Edman-Swift



My favorite Christmas hymn is "In the Bleak Midwinter," because it's such beautiful poetry: "Earth stood hard as iron, Water like

a stone; Snow had fallen, snow on snow, snow on snow, In the bleak midwinter, Long ago."

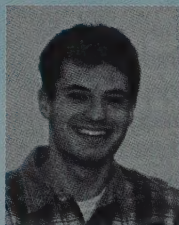
Kate Sprutta Elliott



When I hear or sing "Joy to the World" it reminds me of the wonder of God's great love for me. I envision the little babe in the manger reaching up for the

cross and remember that Jesus is the reason for the season.

Bette Bruce



Like many people, I have several favorite hymns. But if I had to pick one, it would be "Oh, Come, All Ye Faithful" because of its high energy

level, confidence, and strength of conviction.

James Satter



My daughter (pictured here) and I enjoy singing "Angels We Have Heard on High" because it has such beautiful

harmony. I love the idea that the mountains echo the angels' heavenly songs. What an amazing image this brings to mind. It is grand having a really good alto part to dive into, too! **LWT**

James J. West



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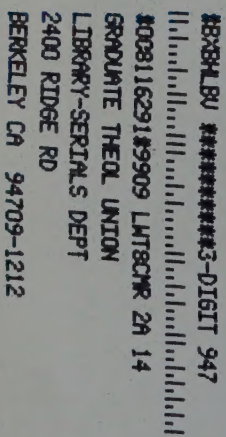
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